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AUTHOR Hanneman, Gerhard J.
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ABSTRACT

Social science researchers and policy makers are not oriented toward supporting one another or sharing information that might be useful in solving social problems. Only recently have public funding agencies supported social science communication research; previously such funding came through private agencies. It seems likely that funds will continue to be available to produce social science policy research for those policy makers who wish to use it. (CH)

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THE UTILITY OF SOCIAL RESEARCH ON COMMUNICATIONS: DIFFICULT QUESTIONS FOR SCIENTISTS AND POLICY MAKERS*

Gerhard J. Hanneman
April 1976

> ". . . Social scientists and policy makers operate in separate worlds with different and often conflicting values, different reward systems, and different languages."[1]

At the outset of this discussion, let me be clear about my positions. Social scientific communication research--studies that deal with the behavioral process and effects of message transactions--is a young activity; communications policy research, whether economic, technical or social, an even younger area of endeavor. The utilization of social science research in the communications policy making process has been systematically ignored for decades. Within the FCC, in the Office of Plans and Policy (established only in 1973 at the behest of OMB) there exists only a limited accounting of social research. Paradoxically, public advocacy groups specifically (e.g., ACT), and the public in general have made increasing demands upon communications policy makers for social value considerations. Nevertheless, until very recently almost all regulatory attempts to enhance broadcast diversity as an antidote to spectral scarcity

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were traditionally approached from an economic basis, or, when social indicators were assessed, from anecdotal and quantitative social parameters.

Simultaneously, there exist few channels of high fidelity that permit the transfer of social data from knowledge makers to knowledge users; there exist even fewer channels that effectively diffuse awareness about the nature and timing of communications policy developments to researchers in the field, specifically those outside of the regular RFP solicitation networks (unfortunately, most social scientists). The emphasis has been and continues to be on economic and technical policy research, with the wedding of economics, social impact anecdotes and technological feasibility frequently occurring out of wedlock in ad hoc settings.

We may, of course, offer many reasons for what's so, including the conclusion proffered at the beginning of this paper by Nathan Caplan and colleagues in the 1975 study on "The Use of Social Science Knowledge in Policy Decision at the National Level" Caplan offers additional peeks at the social science/policy maker liaison. From their interviews with 204 federal executives they report that social science data were rarely considered compelling enough to take precedence over political considerations. Further, federal executives shared the belief they found, that social scientists in general are naive about policy making and the role of politics in determining the utility of their research and their findings.

Forrest P. Chisman[2] recently offered some additional reasons for this incomplete relationship. He suggests social science research has had little impact on policy makers because (a) it is not very good, (b) it is not intended to have impact, (c) it is misdirected, and (d) mismanaged. He asserts the importance of timing, scope, and advocacy, among other attributes as necessary for enhancing the impact of social science research.

We might add another reason to this growing list: While the needs of policy makers are best met by sophisticated interdisciplinary research, the academy provides little incentive or reward for its conduct. However, I contend that the best social science talent remains in the University sector, even though, as Wally Baer[3] suggests, independent research centers are currently better suited to pursue communications policy research. Unfortunately, the orientation of academic incentives--scholarly publication, building an invisible college peer network, tenure and funding rewards--does not support the production of policy oriented research.

Typically, after stipulating the statistical so what of their findings, social scientists normatively do not go on to discuss the social so what of their knowledge claims. In fact, academic social scientists in general quickly find that traditional discipline-bound journals and peers have little appreciation for policy research, particularly interdisciplinary research, in effect forcing the researcher into the role of marginal man: belonging not fully to either his network of disciplined peers

and only temporarily (depending upon research integrity) to researchers pursuing similar policy paths.

I need not belabor the point that the liaison between social scientists and communications policy makers has not worked. We are all probably in agreement about that point even though notable contrary examples are apparent, particularly within the last few years. What we may not reach agreement about as readily however, are the questions that we need to ask each other, the agreements we need to make, and the responsibility we need to take in order for this liaison to be responsive to "our" clients: the general public.

Given this brief introduction, the hard questions that remain for both social scientists and policy makers might be stated as follows:

1. What choices are social scientists willing to make in order that their research have impact in the policy making arena?

2. What assumptions are social scientists willing to make explicit about the impact of communications research?

3. What cheese are social scientists willing to give up in order to affect policy making, and conversely what cheese is being offered by various policy makers to encourage a flow of high quality social science data to knowledge users?

4. What mechanisms provide incentive for both social science researchers and policy makers to take responsibility for dissemination and acquisition, respectively, of pertinent social science data?

These questions, of course, go beyond the traditional ethical and moral debates among researchers which take divisible positions

toward theory building research and an action orientation. Such positions are seen as antagonistic and advocacy is often viewed as beyond the province of the scientist. Yet, we appear to be on the verge of witnessing, I believe, a healthy elasticity in the problem orientation of social scientists, an elasticity reinforced by the problem oriented demands of students and funding agencies. Simultaneously, however, appropriate safeguards must be present at all times to assure that the scramble for contracts and grants in a tightly competitive funding market does not overwhelm and demean the rather mundane efforts of science in general.

In our discussion of social research on communication and policy making, the critical relationship we must address is the execution of that research vis-a-vis the agenda-setting function of contractors and granting agencies as well as the agenda-setting functions and needs of the policy makers--the ultimate knowledge users. Problem oriented social science research appears to be either conducted in the absence of knowledge of policy or it is geared to the needs of the particular funding agencies, for example NSF's program on cable delivery of urban services or its more recent announcement of a program of policy research on the social effects of television. The relationship between research and funding agency in promoting communications policy research is both the weakest and strongest link in fostering policy oriented social science research.

Before elaborating the questions just raised, let's clarify some definitional problems. Social research on communications policy may be classified into four categories. First, "traditional" policy oriented research. Typically such research has an inter-disciplinary component, and such research is clearly labeled action oriented or problem oriented. The goal of such research is to address a specific societal problem or a specific policy deliberation.

A second type of social research on communication might be called demonstration research in which the market feasibility of certain concepts and technologies are evaluated for delivery capability and social and economic success. The recent NSF cable experiments are an example of this type of research process.

A third type of research we are addressing is social effects research. Traditionally, social effects research has been the most basic of all of these categories and has had few, if any, action components. Traditionally, too, it has focused on the effects of broadcasting; only lately has this focus widened to include the effects of communications technology. A recent example of an excellent model of research with policy making payoffs in the social effects arena, is a series of studies by George Comstock entitled Television and Human Behavior[4] which reviewed existing data on the effects of television for their generalizability and implications. While these studies do not make advocacy, they are in a format readily usable in any policy deliberation.

The fourth, and clearly the cross cutting category is what might be called theory building research or sometimes, basic research. The goal of such an endeavor is simply to build a series of knowledge claims that have parsimony and falsifiability with respect to some component of the communications process. The work of Bandura[5] and his associates on modeling aggressive behavior by children provides an illustration here.

Basic research of the communications process, however, is the most troublesome to me. Of course, it should be protected, nurtured and funded. However, when it focuses on mediated communication behavior (e.g., the effects of television, the impact of cable television) as opposed to human communication behavior, the research becomes extremely vulnerable to charges of having an implicit policy orientation since the communications vehicle--particularly a mass medium--may be controlled by federal policy. We shortly shall elaborate this point.

Questions and Answers

In order to focus this paper, I will now propose some specifics for each of the questions enumerated earlier in this paper. The following statements take the form of recommendations, and will be followed by a discussion.

1. What choices are social scientists willing to make in order that their research have impact in the policy making arena?

   - For the research to have impact, social scientists must be willing to make advocacy interpretations of their data, or be willing to conduct pure policy oriented research;

- o social scientists must choose to engage in interdisciplinary research that transcends traditional intellectual iron curtains;

- o social scientists must be willing to incorporate the needs of the policy process in the research design, for example the inclusion of economic parameters;

- o social scientists must be willing to take responsibility for disseminating an interpretable discussion of their findings and policy implications through appropriate policy channels; dissemination via the mass media would be a necessary adjunct of this process.

- o social scientists must be willing to break the funding cycle-agenda setting functions of funding agencies in order to enhance the timing of their research.

2. What assumptions are social scientists willing to make explicit about the impact of communications research?

- o research and analysis of regulatable processes, that is telecommunications, have implicit policy orientations that necessitate taking an advocacy position if the research is not to be used in ways unintended by the scientist; the scientist abdicates his responsibility for the import of his findings without such conclusions;

- o as an increasingly strong agent of social control, telecommunications research may by definition be utilized for social engineering policy; this consideration should be carefully weighed prior to the inception of the research;

- o the assumption that empiricism is the only game social scientists can play needs to be carefully examined; alternative forms of evidence, e.g., legal precedents, may be invoked without diminishing the case.

3. What cheese are social scientists willing to give up in order to affect policy making, and conversely what cheese is being offered by various policy makers to encourage a flow of high quality social science data to knowledge users?

   - o to affect policy, social scientists must be willing to give up "total" control of variable definition; there appears to be little substantive difference between linking variables to an invisible college network or to policy makers; total control has always been a myth;

   - o both policy makers and social scientists need to recognize that operationalism which leads to successful empirical manipulation is a mutual goal; on the other hand policy makers need to be more courageous in funding more generalizable studies, with perhaps lower payoff; both groups need to let go of the notion that political success is equated with statistical and empirical success; negative findings do provide information;

   - o policy research funding agencies need to establish long term programs and stable funding bases across a number of institutions; one shot policy programs that build integrity and then fail to support it over time serve no one's purpose; a medical research facility model would be an appropriate starting point;

   - o accounting of vita of key research personnel by funding agencies should include analysis of a policy and public orientation; such activity would hopefully, drive institutions to incorporate such criteria in the promotion and tenure evaluations;

   - o short term, fast turn around funding should be available for social scientists to respond quickly to policy developments.

4. What mechanisms provide incentive for both social science researchers and policy makers to take responsibility for dissemination and acquisition, respectively, of pertinent social science data?

   - o as is found in most current NSF RANN solicitations, research dissemination activities should be a necessary component of every research project;

- o rule making and policy making entities should acquire personnel (or utilize consultants) who could actively retrieve and interpret existant social science data pertinent to particular policy developments;

- o summer consultancies and job opportunities should be made available for social sciencists in rule making and policy making organizations;

- o a third party organization, such as the Aspen Institute should take responsibility for informing a social science constituency of policy needs on a timely basis;

- o both public advocacy groups and policy oriented agencies should encourage the formation of policy conferences in Washington on a topic by topic basis; such conferences should be outside of the formal hearing process; these might take the form of the FCC's forthcoming panel investigating the relationship between over-the-counter drug advertising on television and children;

- o the extramural reward structure should encourage empirical and nonempirical policy analysis from social scientists by structuring specific conferences, grants and publication to support such a bias.

Conclusion

Throughout this discussion I have presented a number of key points:

- o social science research, in general, is neither oriented to or utilized by policy makers, and neither are policy makers oriented to social scientists;

- o neither group has made much effort to build a liaison; liaisons are typically established by social scientists with travel budgets to build and sustain Washington contacts;

- o only recently have public funding agencies, (e.g., NSF) supported communications policy research; heretofore the private foundations, notably The John and Mary Markle Foundation, and the Ford Foundation have supported these research efforts;

- o the funding linkages are the most problematic in encouraging the bridging of research interests due to their fickle and one shot nature.

In order to reach any agreements among all of us about the intent of our work, I would hope we could agree on purpose first. It seems to me that we are all interested in creating a robust telecommunications industry that provides diverse content to various publics. As researchers let us agree that assessment of the effects of content, as opposed to technologies, may be used to regulate that diversity. Let us not continue to hide behind jargon wordnoise and fail to take responsibility for our findings by ignoring the so what. In the case of television, let us agree that if we conclude specific antisocial effects that either we advocate some form of regulation of the cause of these effects or the research becomes a pedantic message communicating one's skills to other researchers, or one's findings to other researchers willing to take an advocacy position.

On the other hand, I believe it is time that this debate cease. We can establish viable communications mechanisms through the private foundations and through bridging institutions to channel needs and data among us. Let us also recognize, however, that while considerable social science research is conducted in ignorance, considerable policy is weighed and implemented in ignorance.

For example, consider the current debate on regulating over-the-counter drug advertising on television. The evidence is strong that children and adults may learn coping strategies from such commercials. Yet, children and adults also learn coping strategies from other types of commercials; in fact from all messages which advocate purchase behavior. On the other hand, a plethora of studies commissioned and reviewed by the National Commission on Marihuana and Drug Abuse[6] in 1973 consistently indicated that parental modeling of drug taking behavior explains most of the variance in individual drug taking. This is a situation not unlike children's modeling of their parents' television behavior: where parents are heavy consumers of television, so are their children. The data are available to yield a policy decision. I applaud the FCC's willingness to examine the data.

Or, take the NAB's Family Viewing Period. Here is an illustration of a self-regulatory attempt, that in the interest of protecting the child's rights under the first and fourteenth amendments, substantially disenfranchises large parts of the audience. And this regulatory attempt is inconsistent with all quantitative data about children's television behavior. For example, our surveys[7] of viewers, as well as our analyses of Nielsen ratings indicate children regularly watch what they want anyhow, and do <u>not</u> start and stop watching television between 7:00-9:00 p.m. (EST).

What about the delivery of information services to the home via cable? The delivery of urban services via cable is only a small component of the larger telecommunications pie and clearly one that benefits those very citizens where cable typically does not penetrate: the low income groups. Restricted experimentation in this area will yield policy implications whose timing and import have already passed and which ignore marketplace demands. Data on the use of telecommunications by the poor are readily available.

In summary, social scientific communications research is available now for a number of current issues, including the regulation of advertising on television or the impact of in-the-home technologies. Two things seem certain: social scientists cannot keep on claiming there is no opportunity to conduct policy research; policy makers cannot keep claiming that social science research for their needs is unavailable.

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